

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

XLV, Number 6

May 2018

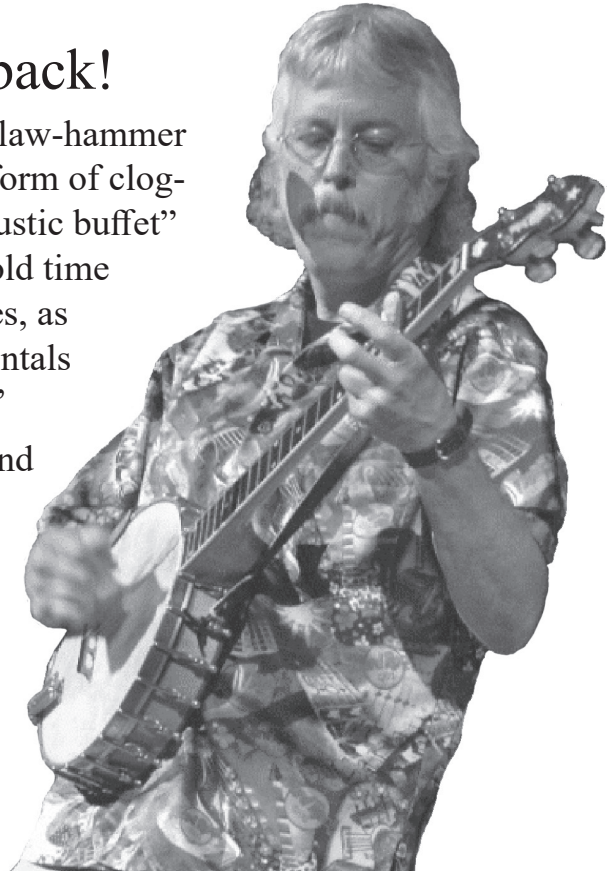
Thursday, May 17, 2018
Old Sewickley Post Office

Join us at 6:30 for refreshments (cabaret seating), followed by a brief Annual Meeting, which will include election of new Directors and the presentation of the 2018 Architectural Preservation Award.

At 7:30, Jay Smar is back!

Armed with two guitars, baritone vocals, claw-hammer banjo, fiddling, singing and flat-footin' (a form of clog-dancing), he will entertain us with an "acoustic buffet" of traditional American and original folk, old time mountain music, bluegrass and gospel tunes, as well as coal mining songs. Guitar instrumentals will garnish this "plate of cultural cuisine."

In the last five years, Jay has toured Scotland twice, received recognition from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, performed at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, recorded music for the Welsh BBC movie "The Welsh in America" and has been selected by Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour to be on their professional touring roster.



PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS A THURSDAY MEETING

Our email address has changed. It is now info@sewickleyhistory.org

The mission of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

Steamboats Were Built Here

The following was excerpted from two articles written by Fred Way, Jr., in July 1960, when he was summertime editor of the Sewickley Herald. The Valley Gossip news magazine mentioned below is in the collection of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society.

I don't remember J. Sharp McDonald, one of the principals of the ancient "Pittsburgh Boat Yard Company," as it was styled. Unquestionably there are many local residents who do remember him, and who may remember the minstrel show given at the Methodist Church in which he took a part, and where he caught pneumonia. He died on May 26, 1910, at his home, I think, an imposing mansion on the upper end of Maple Lane, Sewickley. Mr. McDonald's second wife was more celebrated than her husband, a gifted songstress who lifted her voice on many local occasions and always for some years during Memorial Day exercises. It was Mrs. J. Sharp McDonald who had the unique distinction of belonging to G. A. R. Hays Post 3, and when she received her badge, in 1881, she was the only woman so honored. Before her marriage she was Annie Colville, and it was her brother, Stuart S. Colville, who joined with J. Sharp McDonald in forming the Pittsburgh Boat Yard Company at Sewickley in 1878.

My Dad, who lived in Edgeworth most of his life, and for whom I was named, then was a small boy. He used to tell me of being taken to the boatyard, riding on a wagon-seat alongside the driver, to get a load of sawdust from what seemed to him an enormous pile of it. This refuse from the boatyard sawmill was used at the Way farm, and doubtlessly at other places in the valley, to preserve blocks of ice sawed from local ponds. A stone-enclosed basement room in the Way barn, which stood near the present Edgeworth Club, was the Way's ice house. I remember this gloomy old stone dungeon, years later, when it had ceased being an icehouse, and had become a stall wherein my Uncle Jack Way kept, for reasons I am unable to supply, an alive buck deer which was reasonably tame if you kept away from it.

This boat yard was a surprising thing. It then was, and still remains, the biggest industry Sewickley has contained. In little more than four years it turned out 18 steamboats, some of them of the largest class plying the Ohio and the Mississippi, and one of which was an ocean-going side-wheeler which plied between Jacksonville, Fla., and Savannah, Ga. Two enormous grain barges were built, and one model barge. Three existing steamers were brought here and rebuilt. I have not discovered even an estimate of the dollar value of these contracts, which must have run well over several hundred thousands of dollars even in those inexpensive times. Possibly fifty or sixty men were continually employed at the yard, which operated steadily winter and summer.

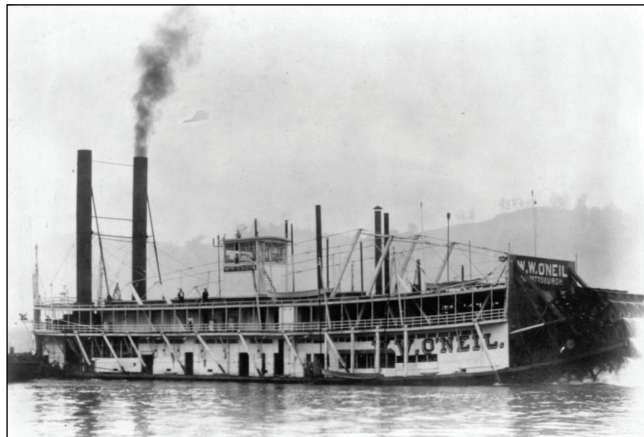
The Herald, issue of March 10, 1906, notices that the ruins of the old boatyard still were evident, 23 years after it had ceased operations, in the form of fire-marked stones and charred logs. For

in 1883 it was burned out. I did a good bit of riverbank exploring along about 1914, but I don't remember any charred logs or fire-marked stone, probably because the location by then had become the local perfumery, the garbage dump and incinerator plant. The stones and logs by then were covered over. The Pittsburgh Boat Yard Company was located along the lower end of present Chadwick Street, below Ferry Street, the property running from the river to the present-day Ohio River Boulevard. Of course the boulevard's location then was the main line (two tracks) of the Pennsylvania Railroad. It originally was single track but in 1865 a second set of rails was put down between Pittsburgh and Rochester. The four-track system was put in 1900.

In those boatyard days, the Pennsy had a railroad station at the culvert where Ferry Street passes under (the same stone culvert which today carries the boulevard), a modest set of wooden platforms, innocent of station house or agent, called Roseburg. Hence the address of the Pittsburgh Boat Yard Company was Roseburg Sta., Sewickley P. O., Pa. One other mote of railroad intelligence might be thrown in here as it had bearing on boatyard matters: the P. & L. E. started service with a two-track line in 1879, a brand new line, and the ferryboat business at the foot of Ferry Street, between Sewickley and Stoops Ferry, pepped up so handsomely that a steam ferry was put in, named Jefferson. Sewickley was on the high road to amounting to something.

A monthly news magazine called "The Valley Gossip," twelve pages and light green cover, was started here and it survived to print its own death notice in the December 15, 1881, issue. Gilbert A. Hays, editor, wrote the death notice and perhaps also the check for the deficit. It is to Mr. Hays' paper that we are indebted for the only on-the-spot account of the Sewickley Boat Yard Company, appearing in the September 1, 1881, issue. It is not a full account. It was written two years before the fire. But it tells more than any local historian has told then or since. Therefore it is valuable stuff.

Now hear this: "The sawmill which forms the central object of the yard was built years ago. The Guys operated it successfully and subsequently Henry Warner, Esq., now County Commissioner, and Joseph Banks, now of Patterson & Co.'s Mills, Allegheny, were actively engaged in the mill before Mr. Jackson took charge. In 1878, three Sewickley men took lease for 10 years from Mr. Jackson; these were Stuart S. Colville, formerly of the Exchange National Bank, but now of New York; J. Sharp McDonald, brother-in-law of Mr. Colville; and W. F. Speer. They started with a capital of \$10,000."

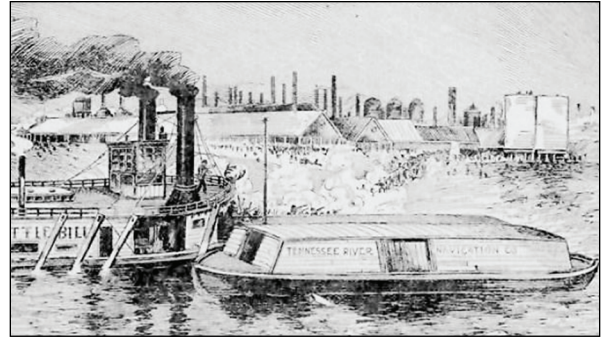


One of the largest boats built here, the towboat W. W. O'Neil

On one occasion Sewickley’s centenarian John C. Anderson, who knew his way around here, stated without reservation that J. Sharp “wasn’t a riverman,” but that his four brothers decidedly were. No one of the four brothers was mixed up in the Pittsburgh Boat Yard Company. One of them, Capt. Marsh McDonald, built and occupied a home, a section of which today forms the central part of the residence of Mrs. Horace Forbes Baker in Osborne.

To further quote the “Valley Gossip” account, dated Sept. 1, 1881: “Thousands of dollars were expended in machinery of the latest pattern. The old single muley saw gave way to the ‘gang’ saw, and a large ‘bands’ saw and a huge circular saw were added to the wood-shaping machinery. The perfume of the newly cut timber and sawdust and chips is a pleasant one, and the ribs and decks of the boats are always popular with the youngsters. The click of the caulker’s mallet is fully as pleasing a sound as that of the croquet mallet, and long may the trans-Ohio hills give us the echoes of the boatyard hammers!”

Here, then, are Sewickley’s steam-boats, presented in approximate sequence, together with some facts about them, which I have managed to gather during some forty years afloat and ashore.



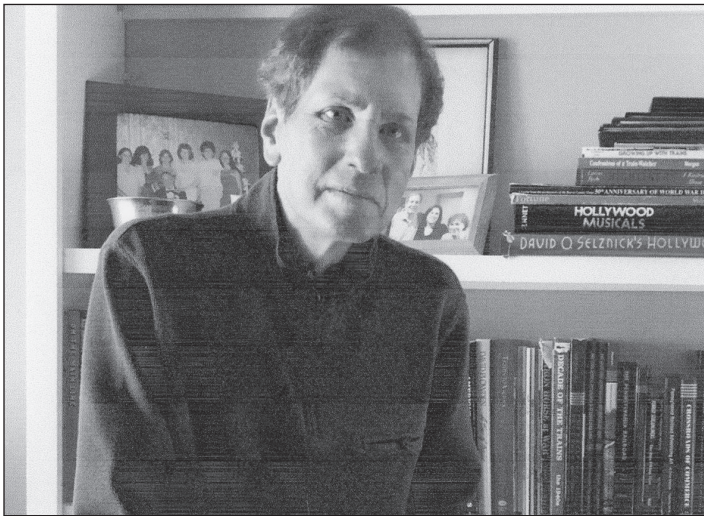
The famed towboat Little Bill, which took the Pinkerton detectives to Homestead and precipitated a battle

- Built in 1879:
- BUTTE Sternwheel packet
- JAMES LEE Sidewheel packet with cotton guards
- WYOMING Sternwheel packet

- Built in 1880:
- FLORIDA Sidewheel packet

(Continued on last page)

Meet SVHS’s New Executive Director, John J. Poister, Jr.



John was born in Chicago, Illinois, but, has lived in Sewickley since 1959. John’s family settled here to be close to his grandfather, Ralph (Jack) Poister, who with his wife, Beatrice, came to Sewickley in 1947. From his first days in Sewickley as an inquiring 9-year-old, John was fascinated with the history and traditions of the community. He remembers walking down the main hall at Sewickley Academy and looking intently at the pictures of class members and events from the school’s earliest days.

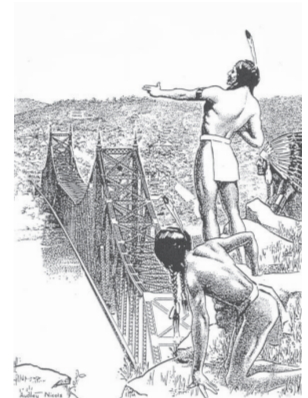
John received his education at the Academy, graduating in 1968, and at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York, where he graduated in 1972 with a degree in communications. From there he returned to Sewickley and took up a career in broadcasting. He worked behind the scenes and on the air for a number of Pittsburgh radio and TV stations, including KQV, WTAE-TV and Radio, WSHH, WJAS, WIXZ, WPGH-TV and WPXI-TV. He also detoured out of broadcasting to serve as Director of Communications for

Allegheny County and Media Spokeman for the Department of Environmental Protection’s Pittsburgh office.

John and his wife, Cecelia (Cece), currently live in Sewickley after living in Edgeworth for over 30 years, where they raised their daughter, Julie. Hobbies include photography, old cars and visiting his four grandchildren. John also maintains a Facebook page called “Lost Pittsburgh TV” that is dedicated to chronicling people, programs and events that are part of the history of broadcasting in Pittsburgh.

John currently serves as a Trustee of the Oncology Nursing Foundation and on the Board of Directors of the Sewickley Valley Community Fund. He also does volunteer work at Pittsburgh Botanic Garden and Pittsburgh International Airport.

“It is vitally important that the history of this wonderful community be preserved and shared. We can’t begin to appreciate Sewickley without knowing who came before us and what they did to establish the homes and the institutions that are still an important part of life in this town. The work of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society is invaluable in shedding light on the important (and even the mundane) events of the past and keeping them alive for generations to follow.”



May 2018

<p>SEWICKLEY VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY</p> <p>President Harton S. Semple, Jr.</p> <p>Vice-President Joe Zemba</p> <p>Secretary Mary Beth Pastorius</p> <p>Treasurer Connor Cogswell</p> <p>Directors Gloria Berry Hal Bonnett Brewster Cockrell Verna Corey Edward Harrell Ivan Hofmann Lori Kastan Marian Miller Jean Sebolt Ian Semple</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>(Continued from page 3)</i></p> <p>LITTLE BILL Sternwheel towboat DEAN ADAMS Sidewheel packet with cotton guards H. T. DEXTER Sidewheel packet JOHN S. HOPKINS Sternwheel packet DOVE Sternwheel packet</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Built in 1881:</p> <p>LITTLE FRED Small towboat JOHN GILBERT Large freight passenger stern-wheeler LITTLE DICK Small towboat W. W. O'NEIL Enormous towboat BILLY EZELL Small towboat</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Built in 1882:</p> <p>BOAZ Large towboat RAYMOND HORNER Large towboat KATE ADAMS Sidewheel packet</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Built in 1883:</p> <p>PATROL Towboat/insptection boat</p>	<p>The lumber industry was critical to steamboat operations. Especially common [in the trans-Appalachian West] were white oak (for steamboat hulls) and white pine (for decking and upper works). Wood was so inexpensive that the timber required for vessels cost twice as much in Europe as in America. According to the 1880 census, the shipyard at Sewickley consumed 100,000 to 225,000 feet of oak, pine and poplar in the construction of each steamboat hull between 180 and 200 feet long. This equates to approximately twenty to fifty old-growth trees per hull.</p> <p>From Adam I. Kane's <i>The Western River Steamboat</i>, Texas A&M University Press, 2004, p. 21-23</p>
<p>Executive Director John J. Poister, Jr.</p> <p>Associate Director Susan C. Holton</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>New Member</i></p> <p>Kathy Bannon, Sewickley</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Special Contributions</i></p> <p>Simon Noel Joan Blair Sullivan Hartley & Ann Walker</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>In Memoriam</i></p> <p>Mrs. James Lea Betty S. Mann</p>